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Lacuna: Transcendence of the Human Body through the Space Between

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Abstract

This essay examines the author's choreography, *Lacuna*, and research integral to its representation. During the choreographic process, experimentation of how the human body moves in relation to different architectural space was observed. In collaboration with the cast of dancers, cohesion of personal experiences in particular locations was evaluated: specifically, investigation of how environments has the ability to trigger habits or patterns of movement from both past and present experiences. A closer look at how the body responds on a visceral level to the physical and emotional sense of place is described. Although the choreographic piece, *Lacuna*, came to be structured in aesthetic form (just as architecture is structured), *Lacuna*, nonetheless, held depth of freedom for open interpretation. Overarchingly, the author investigates the nature of space and its effect on our humanity; here we see the translation of psychological response into physiological artistry. In the end, movement vocabulary is not randomly arranged; ultimately, there is order. Paradoxically, this order originates from *and* transcends, one's personal relationship with space.

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Lacuna: Transcendence of the Human Body through the Space Between

By

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the author's choreography, *Lacuna*, and research integral to its representation. During the choreographic process, experimentation of how the human body moves in relation to different architectural space was observed. In collaboration with the cast of dancers, cohesion of personal experiences in particular locations was evaluated: specifically, investigation of how environments has the ability to trigger habits or patterns of movement from both past and present experiences. A closer look at how the body responds on a visceral level to the physical and emotional sense of place is described. Although the choreographic piece, *Lacuna*, came to be structured in aesthetic form (just as architecture is structured), *Lacuna*, nonetheless, held depth of freedom for open interpretation. Overarchingly, the author investigates the nature of space and its effect on our humanity; here we see the translation of psychological response into physiological artistry. In the end, movement vocabulary is not randomly arranged; ultimately, there is order. Paradoxically, this order originates from *and* transcends, one's personal relationship with space.

Introduction

Does one relate to, and define themselves by, the space one lives in and through? What ignites stimuli in the human body to move? Are one's past experiences in relation to present sensory inspirations a source? For the past three and a half years, I have unintentionally been connecting to my surrounding spaces for inspiration, specifically, to those containing aesthetic architectural beauty. I have recognized a pattern, that being: I was drawn to the unique collaboration between body and space. Intrigued by diverse environments and their influence on our movement, I was interested in exploring this somatic relation of space and its significance. This led to noticing the significance of the human body's presence in the continuation of the ground beneath and sky above. Here I questioned: what about the space between? As one walks through space, one moves the air to fill the places where the body once was. In our efforts to follow a trend from past familiarities, we have the freedom to develop, to create anew.

The relationship to the space between cardinal lines, connections between fundamental points, is seen when viewed one-dimensionally. However, in the practice of movement, the range of association is enlarged. This is achieved by noticing the smallest of details, as one has the ability to remain present in the moment and attentive to the environment. In effect, this engaged the foundation of my Senior Dance Project, *Lacuna*, literally meaning "gap" or "space between." Ultimately, how humanity moves through the world narrates my choreographic process and premise of research. Details regarding the experimentation present three primary ideas of significance: the investigation of emotion-spatial experiences, the ecology of space, and the psychological response to physiological artistry.

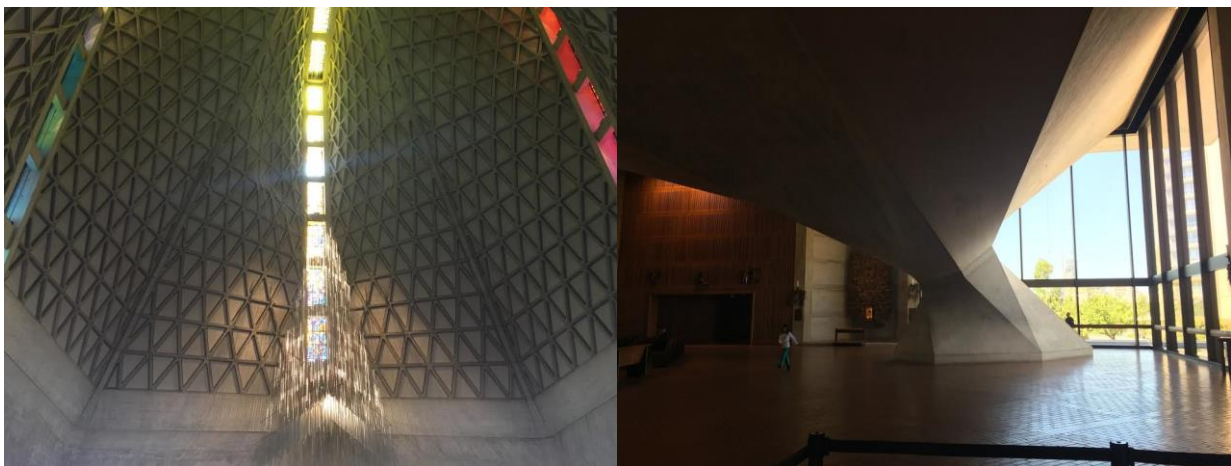
Experimentation of the Space Between

Artists draw from aesthetic and emotional experiences, ideas and moralities. As Anne Sheppard, philosopher on aesthetics of art, asserts, “When one admires a work of art, one not only evaluates it aesthetically, but evaluates it by the state of mind or emotional reaction one has by it” (83). As in any creative design process, there is a constant interplay of thought and sensation. Investigation of the relationship between geometries of space and humanity’s primary sensations began the process of my Senior Dance Project. Specifically, I chose to investigate the vast structural articulations and spaces between architectural structures. As I began to approach my choreography, I turned to two of my favorite buildings in San Francisco, the Cathedral of Saint Mary of the Assumption and The San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI). I was interested in not only the visual appeal of these structures, but in their historical contribution and immense artistic addition to the city.

Saint Mary’s Cathedral was designed in collaboration with local artists John Michael Lee, Paul A. Ryan, Angus McSweeney, Pier Luigi Nervi, and by international artist Pietro Belluschi. The building process was completed in three years, and officially blessed on May 5, 1971. This 255 square foot base, 190 foot high building, is poised with eight sections of hyperbolic paraboloids. While the inside is breathtaking in its inviolability, the outside resembles an enormous washing machine, hence it has been deemed “Our Lady of Maytag” (Pier).

Regarding SFAI, the first series of buildings surrounding its cosseted courtyard were designed by local architects James Bakewell and Arthur Brown. The addition, which features an outdoor-stepped amphitheater and conical skylights, was completed in 1969 by Paffard Keatinge-Clay (SFAI History). With a secret inspiration behind every detail in architectural

space, a sense of mysterious wonder is maintained and has the potential to evoke a vibratory infinity of emotions in the admirer. Architect Peter Zumthor's insights come alive here: he has wisely noted that artists are called to, "embrace the mysterious void called space in a special way and make it vibrate" (22).



Anica Bottom

Cathedral of Saint Mary of the Assumption





Anica Bottom

San Francisco Art Institute

With these two locations as the foundation for investigation, I set my dancers to their first task. This was to create movement vocabulary based on their initial response to viewing photographs of the locations. With complete freedom of choice, the dancers drew from hypothetical existence in the space, for we were in the studio. Although this exercise allowed for the dancers to communicate their response through movement, psychological elements of connection were challenging to make. Sub sequentially, we physically travelled to the locations to discover the presence of existing in these spaces. Immediately following their improvisations in both of these spaces, I asked them a series of questions to prompt conversation regarding their experience. These focused on triggers of habitual movement, seeds of pattern, visceral connections, and limitations:

1. Did the environment trigger habits or patterns of movement from past experiences?
If so, did these seeds of patterns dominate you to produce positive or negative associations within you?
2. Without judgment of the choices you made, do you feel they were more conscious or unconscious and instinctual? Did you feel spontaneous and creative or measured and precise in your movement/reactions?
3. Did you feel limited by the space? If so, do you think this was psychological or physiological?
4. As certain kinds of shapes are more appealing to others, how did the architecture affect you? Did you find you were able to respond to the architecture on a visceral level in sight of curvature as opposed to sharp angularity?
5. Did you feel a sense of withdrawal or expansion in these spaces? More so in particular to one over another?
6. As you created your own establishment in the space, how did you connect to others within the environment? What was your relation to the others around you? Did you seek protection or refuge from certain locations or others around you?

Emotion-Spatial Experiences

This experimentation led to further research into the significance of emotion-spatial experiences. Beyond the focal differentiations of both locations, the dancers responded on varying levels as their movement energetically extended into the surrounding space. Overall, they reported feeling substantially conservative at the Cathedral, whereas a sense of curiosity dominated their response at the SFAI. The vast amount of available space at the location of Saint Mary's and the sacredness of the site brought about internal timidity, which moved the dancers to remain humbled. Conversely, in the more confined space of SFAI, obvious expansion and freedom of artistry were evident. Here we see that systemic interactions of conscious linearity, as well as genres of unconscious recollections, were imposed. In other words, they

consciously communicated with the geometry of the architecture, and unconsciously brought their past experiences to interact with the surrounding space.

The dancers' responses described above show that each spatialized or familiar movement phrase of the present is cognitively mapped to become an immense catalogue of past geographies. These, in turn, shape our experiences to make who we are and continually mold who we are to become. Clearly, as ecologist Owain Jones asserts, "If we are all vast repositories of past emotional-spatial experiences, then the spatiality of humanness becomes even deeper in extent and significance" (206). We recollect former emotional-spatial experiences in an attempt to create a representation of experience in any given situation. The development of our emotional geographies is political, gendered, and spatially articulated. Here we see emotion as an interpretation through movement as abstract, embodied, purely rational, and objective. Owain Jones highlights this in *An Emotional Ecology of Memory, Self and Landscape*:

The full humanness and complexity of being-in-the world, clearly links with the work of geographers who are trying to confront non-cognitive knowledges of the unconscious [and] the body [...] Not only do the vast stores of emotional-spatial experience embedded in us influence our (spatialized) practices of the now, they will also shape [...] our substantive, theoretical and methodological predilections. (207)

With these psychological and physiological experiences of being in the world, one's life becomes a valuable tool and means to knowledge, indeed, a spirit free to move from and beyond tradition. Through an inevitable lived culture, one develops the power to initiate further response to situations with bodily movement. As we initiate bodily movement from significant past points

of reference, we drift into the future. At times this can be when consciousness falls to a dreamlike state, as one's imagination takes over to create.

Ecology of Space

The act of perceiving and remaining engaged in the space allotted allows for a natural conversation within the body. Pockets of sensation and engagement cultivate a sense of pleasure or sensation, not strictly limited to knowledge found in concentration. Just as our own identity of self must be understood, an infinite sense of detail into the identity of the structures must be considered for interpretation. As Zumthor writes in *Thinking Architecture*, "The design process is based on a constant interplay of feeling and reason" (21). This inspiration, in turn, illuminates an emotion through which bodily movement can be embraced. Zumthor continues:

Buildings that have a strong impact always convey an intense feeling of their spatial quality [...] we are concerned with but a tiny part of the infinity that surrounds the earth, and yet each and every building marks a unique place in that infinity. (22)

With interior and exterior architectural designs, an asymmetrical balance creates a storyboard; tales of meaning behind each element beckon to be told as an exploration of self-identity. In this case, with fleeting incidences, the experience of the dancers energetically extended into the surrounding space beyond the foreground. One of the dancers, Jacob Williams, reflected on his experiences:

St. Mary's made me think of wonderment and the silence and repression that go along with the awe of such a fantastic building. Alternatively, the Art Institute

inspired more of a sense of wonder. Meaning, that this environment was beautiful, yes, but also had space to grow, develop, and become fully realized. This space allowed for conversation, unlike St. Mary's, which felt complete and had no room for new ideas [...] the buildings we enter can change and affect how we choose to represent ourselves.

The choice and perception of the dancers played a key role in this relation to special environments. How one chooses to see within movement gives way to the eyes fixating on specific objects or thought. In order to choose between an instinct, sight and other sensory sensation must be involved. A certain detachment from what is being seen simultaneously becomes how one sees more clearly. Such clarity can be experienced consciously, unconsciously, selectively, or based on opinions in the moment. Seemingly, this brings about an instinctual choice, based on perception. Among the six senses, awareness of the surrounding space gives way to a perceptive strategy of life. Outside factors and the past constantly affect our bodily movement, yet, by nature we are improvising in the present. Madison Palmer, one of the dancers, remarked on her experience involving her choices in the spaces:

I felt limited inside the Cathedral, because I knew it was a place of worship. Whereas, I was especially attentive in the Art Institute because there was so much to take in. I felt like I was at the playground. Some [choices] were conscious and some were not. I allowed myself to find one inspiration and play around with the idea, following instinct. When I felt I had fulfilled one thought, I selected another.

In efforts to facilitate self-knowledge as we build our instinctual movements and purify our senses, we reveal ourselves as free spirits through dance. As Kimerer LaMothe, philosopher and dancer, says, “Dancing builds energy in us. It builds the sense of vitality and power that provides us with a perspective from which to reflect critically and creatively on all aspects of culture” (99).

Psychological Response to Physiological Artistry

Ultimately, a continuity of experience in space presents self-reflection, an opportunity for psychologically observing oneself, and for seeing physiologically. A somatic meditation on viewing is emulated. In fact, an insight into one’s life and personal values can be viewed through distinct interpretation and relation to place. The voice of Anne Sheppard resonates here, “Art can have a moral influence by giving us imaginative insight into other people and by inculcating values and attitudes, often in subtle and indirect ways” (153). Even in the architectural stillness, a truth of life remains evident and an excitement is created from within and transferred to those present. Erin McKay, dance cast member, commented on her response to her improvisation in the spaces:

It is interesting when you make a specific shape with your body, via an impulse, and realize that you’ve matched a geometric relation to the architecture of the space. These unplanned gestures through space link as you are moving with the environment as a counterpoint. Having other moving figures in the space also contributes to the overall atmosphere. Is it the same space when there is one person as opposed to multiple bodies in movement? A space can determine the energy that the bodies contribute to the space.

Space can be full with bodies, but the intention of connection and attention to presence must be observed. While the architecture makes the space we reside in, the life that envelopes it reveals a truth of expression. The beauty found in imagery of space, followed with depth of meaning, cultivates a scene of influenced freedom.

One can begin to see that an atmosphere is ultimately cultivated by the relationship one has with the space. The revealing of the truest self and the most authentic response enables the expression of shared experiences. This ultimately comes from not just seeing a space, but knowing it through complete embodiment. Physiological artistry is key to the response one has to varying environments. Value placed in the profound investment of sensations allow for memory to unfold through improvisation. Literary artists Gary Snyder and Wendell Berry tell us that no place is a place until we have moved in it, that is, until we have submitted our bodies to it. Snyder writes, “No place, not even a wild place, is a place until it has had that human attention that at its highest reach we will call poetry” (qtd. in Stegner 4). A sense of place is therefore realized with the act of movement; a poetry of bodily becoming (a continual coming-into-consciousness through movement) emerges. This occurs with pure presence and the established relationship between person and place. Berry continues, “If you don’t know where you are, you don’t know *who* you are” (qtd. in Stegner 1). Surely, dance helps us fully realize our place to better understand ourselves.

When we know where we are, we know who we are. With acknowledgement of our place in space, we have the ability to gather and express information through movement. LaMothe expresses this eloquently, “It is bodily movement that provides humans with a medium for gathering and expressing knowledge of their relationship to what appears to them in and through that movement as a universal Dionysiac movement. To say that the ‘soul’ awakens,

then, is to say that a person develops a physical consciousness of her kinetic creativity” (121).

As we become more aware of our surroundings and allow for reflection on our experiences, our bodily becoming is thoroughly enriched. Our physical and spiritual energy inevitably gives way to an aura of unfolding artistry.

Conclusion

By cultivating a relationship with one’s surrounding space, a physical consciousness creates a rhythm of bodily becoming. Recognizing the vitality of this brings purpose to each environment or space. An advocacy for our own personal growth must include recognition and value placed on this presence. Composition becomes increasingly compelling and complicated as the level of presence is ignited. Improvisation, as a spontaneous mode of creativity, takes practice to catalyze bodily worth. An individual’s vicissitudes occur and develop as a process, but with no goal of a final product. Honest and rational reflection, provided with the medium of movement, develops the strength of a supple imagination and an intellectual discipline that create continual evolution of self and place.

The embodiment of space and its reflection on bodily movement, how environments have the ability to trigger patterns of movement, and our response as humans and as dancers create an appreciation for life. This is because gratitude brings us back to what matters in life. Through experimentation, a panoramic landscape of movement was created by the dancers in *Lacuna* in the locations. In transferring to the stage, the cast of dancers all held base phrases from past rehearsals, but if one focused in on a particular dancer at any time during the performance, an entirely different experience would unfold through each viewer’s lens. Just as the participants of the movement form relationships, the viewers are able to engage with the dancers; this is done as individuals of humanity as they shared their stories and experiences.

Quality is readily perceived through the investigation of emotion-spatial experiences, the ecology of space, and the psychological response to physiological artistry. Each and every space transcends an enlightened atmosphere as it is sensed by each individual. Although substantially opposing senses of relationship dominate in differing locations, varying levels of kinetic response energetically extend into the surrounding environment. Through each sensation, triggers of habitual movement, seeds of pattern, visceral connections, and limitations are revealed. By knowing where we are, we understand our becoming. The architecture of the space takes on a new meaning as one fully embodies it. With complete submission to the void of space, realization allows for a bodily embrace and an infinite force and source of vibration.

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